

LAUGHING

Sermon By Reverend Kathleen Hepler
First Parish in Framingham Unitarian Universalist
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READING

There was a boy whose parents named him “Odd”. All of his childhood others teased him . I mean they would just laugh calling out his name. “Hey are you Odd?” Odd learned to walk tall with the name, and became a successful lawyer. The amusement with his name continued in that profession, as you can imagine. When Odd was an old man he made plans for his approaching death. He decided that in death he would no longer be identified as “Odd”. He chose a black headstone with absolutely nothing engraved on it knowing that, in death, he would be free. After he died, It turned out that most of the time, when people gazed at the blank stone with no name, they would say..... “Now, that there is Odd.”

SERMON

There was a little boy of seven sitting in church with his parents. The sermon droned on and on. He was so-o-o-o bored. He was looking around and climbing around and his mother kept telling him to listen...and the sermon droned on and on. It was close to Memorial Day and there was a row of American flags along one side of the sanctuary. The boy whispered a question to his mother: “What are those flags for?” His mother whispered back, “They are in memory of those who died in the service.” Nodding his head with understanding the little boy then asked, “The 9:15 or the 11:00?”

He was surely on to something! There are certain ways we are in church and certain ways we are not. Somehow we have all learned to check our red rubber noses at the door. Not today. Today we remember the healing place of laughter in any spiritual journey, any human journey. (I say “thanks” to those five of you who donned the rubber noses this morning! The Holy Fool is in the house!)

Many years ago when I was a young minister and quite full of gravitas about many things, I found myself in a heated conversation with someone who was questioning my giving a feminine pronoun to the word God. I was deeply intent on raising this man’s consciousness. I was dead serious about the importance of this. He listened and then replied with a twinkle in his eye, “ I’m sure this will change my life. I always wondered why only half of my prayers had been answered!”

Are we having fun yet? This is a question that first came into my life in the summer of 1983 when I was a student chaplain in a large hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I worked that summer on the cardiac intensive care unit and on the labor and delivery floor. Each of the five students (A Roman Catholic, a Methodist, a Baptist, a Presbyterian and I) would meet for coffee breaks and lunch.

As the summer wore on, our break times became more and more hilarious. Some of the best belly laughing I have ever done was that summer when a good part of every day was spent with sick, anguishing or dying people. The question, “Are we having fun yet?”, became our group’s motto. It was as if some mirthful balancing had to arise to offset the steady interaction with the more sorrowful aspects of human life.

Don’t get me wrong. We were not making fun of people or their pain and tragedies. We were not laughing at anyone. We were laughing, well...to survive...to take residence for a while away from those deeply difficult places of being (where we are all one)...up into the lightness of being, where, too, sacred unity abides.

One of the best half hours of television I have ever seen and one that I still watch every now and again was the Mary Tyler Moore episode called “Chuckles the Clown Bites the Dust”. You can see it on YouTube and I recommend it. Chuckles, who had a children’s show at the station, has died in a freak accident. He was grand marshal at a parade dressed as Peter Peanut and was killed by an elephant. Mary is shocked and dismayed as her colleagues in the newsroom, Mr. Grant, Murray, Sue Ann Nivens and Ted Baxter start to lose their ability to be morose and begin joking hilariously about the demise of Chuckles the Clown. In telling everyone about the death Mr. Grant says seriously, “He went to the parade dressed as Peter Peanut...and a rogue elephant tried to shell him. Lucky more people weren’t hurt.”

Murray: “That’s right. After all, you know how hard it is to stop after just one peanut. And, it could have been worse. He could have gone as Billy Banana and had a gorilla peel him to death. “

And so it goes, that everyone but Mary is laughing with abandon at the death of their friend, Chuckles the Clown.

Change scenes to the actual funeral and it is Mary who cannot control her laughter. The minister says in a typical clergy funeral voice, “Remember Mr. Fee-Fi-Foo’s little catch phrase, remember how when his arch rival Senor Caboom would hit him with the giant cucumber and knock him down? Mr. Fee-Fi-Foo would always pick himself up, dust himself off and say, “I hurt my foo-foo”. (Mary has totally lost it by now.)

“Life’s a lot like that”, he goes on. “From time to time we all fall down and hurt our foo -foos.” Then he quotes the sign off words of every Chuckles show: “A little song. A little dance. A little seltzer in the pants.” By this time Mary is snorting with guffaws!

This is all said in that serious eulogy way and everyone in the room is listening with appropriately mournful faces. The minister then asks her to stand and go ahead and laugh because, “Chuckles would have loved that. This is what he lived his whole life for, to make people laugh. “

At that point, Mary begins to sob.
A funny and poignant rendering of the thin veil between laughter and tears.

Have you had a good laugh lately? Think back on your week. Was there one moment of sheer abandoned mirth? One time of self-forgetting playfulness?

“You were a sight. Your mouth was twisted open, your tongue was stuck out, your lips pulled back and your nostrils flared. Your cheeks turned red and you doubled over gasping. Your stomach, chest and ribs ached. You were speechless. (San Francisco Chronicle, 1/84) Gelotologists (from the Greek word meaning laughter) have discovered that laughing gives a hearty workout to nearly every organ of the body, lightens stress, anxiety, depression and pain. Hormones released during laughter can improve blood pressure, aid digestion and burn calories.

Mark Twain put it this way in Tom Sawyer: “...the old man laughed loud and joyously, shook up the details of his anatomy from head to foot, and ended by saying that such a laugh was money in a man’s pocket, because it cut down the doctor’s bills like everything.”

This, from the book of Proverbs: “A joyful heart is good medicine. But a broken spirit dries up the bones.” (17:22)
Laugh and be well!

“Laughter is ancient, predating the development of language. It’s ubiquitous; all mammals do it, in one form or another. Chimpanzees do it, panting with delight in response to tickling or pratfalls, as noted by none other than Charles Darwin. It’s also one of the first things babies learn. Now, though scientists are asking two dead serious questions: where does laughter come from and why do we do it.” Recent studies suggest laughter evolved between 2 and 4 million years ago, after we learned to walk on two legs but before we could speak. For our hominid ancestors laughter may have signaled safety and facilitated group interaction, making human society possible. ..just as it does today. (Ode Magazine, August, 2009, Vol. 7, Issue 6,)

Laughter is good for relationships. Research shows that the essential ingredient for laughter is not a good joke, but another person. In his psychological studies Abraham Maslow discovered that the people who stayed married the longest were those with a continuing sense of humor. They laughed a lot. When we laugh we embrace a moment of love that transcends the particular and puts us in the universal. We respond spontaneously with our whole self through the vehicle of our body, and we are in a minor altered state chemically. We are catapulted out of usual thought patterns and into a different present focus. Laughter broadens the context and places us together in awareness of the universal follies of human life.

A lawyer turned clown minister writes that she decided to change careers in a moment of laughter with a child: “The turning point came when she was volunteering at Mother Teresa’s orphanage in Calcutta, where most of the children were disabled. There was a little girl, Anna, who couldn’t hear or

speak. A nun told me to hug her to my chest. When I did, an amazing thing happened: She laughed. We communicated through the vibrations of joy.” (Ode, p. 41)

Laugh and communicate through the vibrations of joy!

For centuries the character of the fool has been part of religion. St. Genesius of Rome is the patron saint of clowns and actors in the Catholic Church. In the mystical branch of Islam the “majzub” is the Holy Fool. And this question is found in Hebrew Scripture called the Talmud: “Who shall bring redemption but the jesters?” In Native American religion the Coyote is the Holy Fool. He is a shape-shifter, an illuminator, and uses pranks to teach people, to surprise people into thinking in new ways, to encourage people to learn from their mistakes and to laugh at themselves. The fool is innocent, spontaneous and playful. She represents the importance of not getting stuck in the form of things so that life becomes rigid and lacking vitality.

It is good for religions to laugh at themselves, lest they become righteous in their idea that they have the final truth. In a Kudzu comic, Reverend Will B. Done is having a conversation with someone. “The Unitarians are unhappy with church league softball. They don’t like our rules. They say they are too strict. “ “What rules?, asks the other man. “Well, like three strikes and you’re out. They want to change it to, ‘three strikes and you’re special.” (Kudzu, by Doug Marlette)

Unitarian Minister A. Powell Davies wrote: “If I were asked what single quality every human being needs more than any other, I would answer the ability to laugh at one’s self. When we see our own grotesqueries, how droll our ambitions are, how comical we are in almost all respects, we automatically become more sane, less self-centered, more humble, more wholesome. To laugh at ourselves we have to stand outside of ourselves and that is an immense benefit. Our puffed-up pride and touchy self-importance vanish; a clean and sweet humility begins to take possession of us. We are on the way to growing a soul.” (unsure of source)

Laughter dethrones the ego so that the sacred truths have room to reside in us, so that we make room for others in our imperfection, so that we remember ourselves as unfinished in every way.

The well-known American Zen Buddhist Roshi, Bernie Glassman dislikes it when people call him a Bodhisattva, which means All Compassionate Being. He calls himself a “Boobysattva”!

This from Hindu Scripture, The Ramayana: “There are three things that are real: God, human folly and laughter. The first two are beyond comprehension, so we must do what we can with the third.”

There is a lovely Navaho ceremony called “A’wee Chi’deedloh “ (The Baby Laughed). A baby is considered to be of two worlds at birth: that of the holy people and that of the earth people. As weeks pass, adults wait and listen for the child’s first chuckle- a sign that signals his or her desire to join the earth people. It is believed that the child takes on the qualities of the person who first coaxes or witnesses the

first laugh. That person will then host a feast and help the baby put a crystal of salt on the tongue of each person, which is meant to rejuvenate the good character in each recipient. At the end the eldest person blesses the baby, wishing her or him a life of generosity and gratitude. (wiki.answers.com)

Laugh and enter the salty life of the earth people!

Laughter, in its own way, can equalize social hierarchies. “It is the gift of immaturity itself, which has enabled us to retain in our best, most human moments the capacity for play...It is, in fact, only those who have failed to remain playful in their adulthood that become our penny-dreadfuls, our gorillas, and baboons. ...the world in the reign of the comic spirit grows lively, vital, creative, dancing, joyful. It is a world that is guarded, not like Eden, by some angel of judgment with a flaming sword, but by the high priests of comedy who invite all to come in who will lay down their rifles and rattles, their poses and posturing, their masks and trumpeting.” (The Humorist, p. 39)

Laughter humbles us and connects us and allows that we are not the center of the universe.
Laugh and become more spacious for the awareness that all life is one!

It was the time in the service when the minister said, “The Lord be with you.” The congregation knew to answer back, “And also with you.” At some point the microphone failed and the minister, tapping the dead mike said, “There is something wrong with this mike.” The congregation answered back, “And also with you”!

There are two times when I notice how beautiful the human face is more than other times...no matter its age or shape or characteristics. All faces are beautiful in a deep way after a good cry and after a big shared laugh. There is a “released” visage...a translucent quality...a kind of purity...a clarity that comes from shared and full expression of sadness or mirth that leaves us changed in some small or large way. Nothing more exquisite than a face made serene by a full, cleansing cry. Nothing more stunning than a face lifted beyond itself to something larger in laughter. The light shines through more clearly then.

May the spirit of the clown, the jester, the Holy Fool be with you!
(And also with you!)